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INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6581
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 2495
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ APR 0538
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 1574
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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM WINS BIG, BOOSTING CORREA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ecuadorian voters approved President Rafael Correa's proposed national constituent assembly by 78.1%, according to unofficial exit polls. The "no" vote won just 11.5% support. Partial official results confirm the same pattern (81.5% "yes" to 12.68% "no" with 58.58% of the vote counted as of April 16). Final official results are expected in within days, and electoral authorities are expected to convoke within a month a 150-day campaign period for national elections to the constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution. The results confirm strong public support for the change agenda promoted by a popular president and will challenge the opposition to promote a more positive agenda for the assembly. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Background: Ecuador's voters took to the polls on April 15 to vote on the sixth referendum since 1979 (only two of the previous were approved). Approval of the referendum would authorize elections for a national constituent assembly "with full powers" to rewrite the constitution and reform government institutions. The government and most political parties campaigned in favor of a "yes" vote. Two political parties (the Christian Democratic Union (UDC) and at the last moment, Alvaro Noboa's PRIAN) and a new university-based movement ("Libertario") supported the "no" vote. The referendum was expected to reflect popular support for President Rafael Correa, currently at around 69%.

Voting Process Normal

¶3. (U) As usual, some polling stations opened late throughout the country but in general voting took place without incident. There were no allegations of fraud or other irregularities reported on voting day. Members of the Correa government expressed confidence when voting that the "yes" vote would easily prevail. Several opposition members of Congress stripped of their political rights by electoral authorities were turned away from the polling station.

¶4. (U) OAS international election observers and national observers confirmed that voting was free and fair. OAS mission chief Dr. Enrique Correa expressed hope that the referendum results would help diminish levels of political belligerence which had undermined political stability in Ecuador over the past decade.

Results Better than Expected

¶5. (U) At the close of the polls Cedatos/Gallup reported the results of exit polls sampling 40,000 voters leaving voting stations, claiming at 2.5% margin of error. Support was

strongest in Quito (85%) and the highlands, weaker in Guayaquil (70%) and Napo province (57%). Official results are expected within five days, and are expected to approximate these sample results. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal had already counted 58% of the vote by the morning of April 16, and is expected to report final results by April 19. Abstention rates for official results were within the normal range at approximately 30%, while the null (7.1% poll, 5.06% official) and blank (3.3% poll, .75% official) were extraordinarily low.

Reaction: Correa Conciliatory

16. (U) Correa welcomed the results as a historic benefit for the Ecuadorian people, not a popularity contest. Looking ahead to assembly elections, he warned voters to "beware of wolves in sheep's clothing," and criticized the "no" campaign for not offering any positive proposal for reform. Correa asserted he would never tolerate the "imposition of a foreign system of government in Ecuador" and insisted he had no intention of reversing dollarization during his four year term.

Comment

17. (SBU) Results were surprising as much for the historically low rate of null and blank votes, as well as the somewhat lower than expected "no" vote. Voter approval of the referendum boosts the Correa government and shifts the political spotlight to upcoming elections for an unbounded assembly, expected to take place sometime between late August and October 7.

18. (SBU) With public attention shifting to new elections, the ongoing dispute between Congress and the electoral authorities could be affected. Overwhelming referendum results may prompt the timid and politicized Constitutional Court to rule definitively against the 57 dismissed congressional deputies. Most voters clearly favored political and economic change over any reservations they may have over the combativeness and direction of the Correa government. The key now will be to encourage the widest possible participation in the assembly elections and a more appealing, positive agenda from opposition sectors.

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